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Life on a conveyor belt

Writing Speeches for DCIs and DDCIs

Craig R. Gralley

CIA has always offered a unique set of job opportunities, unmatched by any private corporation or other government agency. During my 15-year career, I have sought a number of unusual assignments, but the one that stands out was my stint as the DCI's principal speechwriter. From 1990 to 1993, I had the pleasure—and more than occasional anxiety—of serving Directors of Central Intelligence Webster, Gates, and Woolsey, as well as Deputy Directors of Central Intelligence Kerr and Studeman.

Some mistakenly believe that the DCI is surrounded by “professional” speechwriters like Peggy Noonan or Tony Snow who wrote for Presidents Reagan and Bush. In DCI Casey's era, however, a decision was made that the DCI needed skilled writers who were first and foremost intelligence officers with an understanding of the people, process, and substance of intelligence.

All DCIs and DDCIs that I worked for took a strong hand in developing their remarks. Our most senior executives take their public appearances seriously, and they work hard to develop a positive public image of the Agency and Intelligence Community. Time pressures and the crush of important business, however, make it difficult for them to focus more than a couple days in advance of a scheduled speech, so they need the help of several speechwriters. In my view my role as chief speechwriter was to work with the DCI and provide him with solid research, some novel ideas, a rational structure for approaching a speech, and a clever aural package for showcasing it.

First Experience

My initial foray into speechwriting began in November 1988, when a vacancy notice crossed my desk in the Directorate of Intelligence. The Office of Public Affairs was looking for a staff speechwriter, and on a whim I

answered the announcement. I was attracted by the possibilities of writing for the DCI, and, in researching speeches, gaining something of an insider's view of the Agency.

As part of the interview, I was given a “timed speech-writing assignment” on a topic of my choice. I was allowed a couple days to complete the task, but I waited until the night before my speech was due before starting to draft the seven-page text. Nevertheless, I produced a totally forgettable speech on nuclear proliferation. (I soon learned that, while procrastination irritates all senior managers—especially the DCI, the valued skill of producing a quality text at the 11th hour is one you develop at your own risk.)

As luck would have it, at the same time that I applied for the speechwriter position my home office “selected” me for a rotational assignment to the National Security Agency (NSA). Because this was an offer that I could not easily refuse, I told the Public Affairs people to “call me in two years,” and I promptly forgot about becoming a DCI speechwriter.

A Summons

Eighteen months later, while at NSA, I received a telephone call. The caller asked if I were still interested in writing speeches for the DCI. “Sure,” I said, “but I have another six months to go on this rotation.” I was told that this was not a problem because “the DCI wants you back.” (I learned later just how anxious my new supervisors were to make the match. There had been several other candidates for the position, but they had

been spooked by stories of late-night calls by frantic DCI Executive Assistants looking for never tasked—and never written—speeches.)

When asked if the job had potential to destroy my career, I was told that it did not, "if you do it right." Armed with that reassurance and my seven-page writing sample, it was not long before I found myself in DCI Webster's office for a get-acquainted session. As I entered the room, I was met by the Judge, and he motioned toward the couch. The DCI walked over to the couch to join me. He had a kindly face, slightly reddened, and he looked somewhat smaller than he did when he appeared on TV. His easy manner lulled me into thinking I was in the presence of my kindly grandfather. And then he spoke.

"Tell me, Craig, what experience do you have writing speeches?" Pause. "What makes you qualified to be my speechwriter?" Pause. "Well," I said, "I know something about intelligence." Gulp.

I do not remember much more about our first half-hour session. It was a blur punctuated by periods of intense anxiety, as the DCI, with a lawyer's precision, dissected my background and laid bare my rather limited qualifications.

As I shook the DCI's hand and made a quick dash toward the door, the Judge turned to me and said, "If I had the time, I would draft my own speeches, but I do not, so I would like you to do it for me."

The Staff and the Job

With that vote of confidence, I returned to the Ames Building, ready to tackle the awards ceremonies, the major public speeches, and the Congressional testimony. I became the head of the Speeches and Appearances Staff, an efficient branch of six persons in the Office of Public Affairs. Two members of my staff responded to invitations; among other assignments, they advised the DCI and DDCI on which speeches to accept, and they worked with host organizations to complete the arrangements. We had two other speechwriters and a secretary.

I soon realized that, without access to the DCI, speechwriting is a hit-or-miss proposition. And you are more likely to miss because you cannot anticipate a DCI's likes and dislikes.

It did not take long to understand that DCI Webster particularly enjoyed appearing before legal groups—a considerable challenge for a speechwriter who had no legal expertise. I was constantly offering outlines and themes that could be steered away from purely legal issues and toward something more international and intelligence oriented, such as "A Lawyer in Public Service." The final speech would be short on "lawyer" and long on "public service."

Another New Boss

I worked for Judge Webster for about six months before he retired and Bob Gates was named by President Bush to be the 15th DCI. I was a bit apprehensive about the change. I had found my original instincts about the Judge to be accurate—he was an intellectually sharp and decent man. Bob Gates had a reputation for being brilliant and tough-minded but also highly demanding.

In my first session with the new DCI, we discussed the style and content of speeches. The DCI said, "If the truth be known, I like writing speeches more than this other stuff. But I just do not have the time . . ." I knew where this conversation was going, but I just bit my tongue and nodded in agreement. Before I left his office, the DCI offered to lend me his box of favorite quotations. "But you have got to promise not to use some of the material—I collected a few of these quotes before the era of political correctness."

We continued the practice started under Judge Webster of meeting once every few weeks. My staff would provide a list of coming speeches, and then we would go down the list and discuss themes and recommend approaches for each.

DCI Gates had an acute ability to focus on each of the proposed themes and to provide immediate guidance typically organized in topic sentences. He could rattle

seven or eight statements off the top of his head, each succinct and logically developed from an earlier point, and outline its conclusion. He also would offer advice on who to contact for information. The DCI would go straight down the list of six or seven speeches, and the meeting would be over in 20 minutes.

An Assembly Line

The only way you knew Bob Gates liked your work was that he gave you more. Judging from the number of speeches that we wrote, he evidently liked what we did. Despite the loss of a speechwriter, our staff produced about 100 speeches a year for the DCI and DDCI—up from about 90 the year before. And the speeches were longer, too. Full-text speeches for DCI Gates typically ran 20 to 30 pages or more. Earlier speeches ran between 15 and 20 pages.

When people ask what it was like to produce so many speeches, I remind them of the old *I Love Lucy* rerun in which Lucy is at the end of a conveyor belt trying to pack pies into boxes. Speeches, just like those pies, keep coming. And you try not to get overwhelmed. To help prevent speeches from falling off the conveyor belt, I was given a laptop computer so I could draft speeches at home on my own time.

A Farewell Address

Despite Bob Gates's no-nonsense and highly organized approach to our work, there were times that he pushed us to the wall. DDCI Dick Kerr's Agency farewell party was one of those times.

Early on, I had a bad feeling about that speech. I contacted the DCI's Executive Assistant to see if the DCI wanted any support in drafting remarks for the retirement ceremony, which included the presentation of the Distinguished Intelligence Medal to the DDCI. Two weeks before the ceremony, I was told, "Do not worry about that speech . . . Bob wants to do that one himself."

Over the years I have developed a sixth sense about the pace of events on the seventh floor and whether a senior executive will have enough time to draft a speech. I was queasy about this one, but, because my

staff was already working on a half-dozen speeches at the same time, I had no desire to "make work." I did not pursue it.

My apprehension was justified. On the day of the ceremony I received a call at 5:30 a.m. from the DCI's Executive Assistant: "Bob thought he'd get a chance to work on the speech, but the time just slipped by. He wants you to do it, and he wants a draft on his desk by 11:00 a.m. today." (Nothing focuses a speechwriter's attention quite like having a few hours to produce a 15- to 20-minute speech for an anxious DCI.) She added, "You'd better get down here right away and work out of the front office so you can get it done."

While my wife drove like a madwoman down Georgetown Pike, I flipped through *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations* searching for ideas that would help me set the proper mood for the occasion. I knew the ceremony had to have a special quality. The DCI's remarks had to be clever and funny, and, at the end, just a bit melancholy. I also knew it would be a challenge to distill the essence of a brilliant career that spanned three decades. Kerr was an analyst's analyst, a homegrown Agency hand who made it to the top—and I wanted to get it right. Nothing sinks a speech or a speechwriter faster than having a senior Agency officer in the audience say, "You missed the mark on that one" or, "That is not the Dick Kerr I know."

When I reached Headquarters, my mind was teeming with a host of unformed ideas on how to approach the speech. I raced through the DDCI's personnel file, gathering facts from PARs written long ago—tidbits that I hoped when blended together would provide a composite picture of Dick Kerr that would in some way foreshadow his ultimate success. I learned that he was a sergeant in the Army and that he started at CIA as a GS-7 industrial analyst in the Office of Central Reference. I bounced ideas off anyone who walked past my desk, while keeping an eye on the clock.

Of course, anything that could go wrong, did. While drafting the speech, the computer crashed twice, and I was beside myself wondering if my remarks had evaporated. After some frantic calls to the ADP Staff, the

speech was dredged up from the recesses of the computer's memory bank and safely stored on a computer disk. I delivered the speech to the DCI's office with just a few minutes to spare.

The DCI used about 80 percent of the speech—a success by speechwriting standards. He used the speech as a framework for adding his own special and personal remarks about Kerr. It was a good example of how DCIs and DDCIs used the speeches we provided as points of departure and as ways of approaching important subjects that they had been unable to focus on because of the press of other business.

A Scuttled Speech

There also are times when the DCI or DDCI prefers not use the prepared text, and there are times when you wished they had never seen the text. On one memorable occasion, Dick Kerr was called in literally at the last minute to fill in for the DCI before an Office of Information Resources symposium.

As Kerr approached the stage, I could see he had my speech tightly rolled up in his right hand. Once behind the podium, he raised it high above his head. "I have this . . . speech here. It was written by some . . . speechwriter." Within the first five seconds of his presentation, the DDCI had disowned the prepared text—not a good sign. As I slumped lower in my front-row seat, Kerr continued to rail against my prepared remarks. "It says that in an era of instantaneous communications, CIA will be challenged by CNN. But I do not believe it and neither should you."

I was grateful that his speech was brief, but the bad news traveled fast. By the time I reached my office, word of the DDCI's performance had preceded me. I knew, as did my supervisors, that Kerr was trying to add some drama and controversy to the conference. I had no intention, however, of reminding the DDCI that the speech was written for the DCI and that it represented his views.

A Unique Challenge

Despite the array of uncontrollable events that can conspire to ruin a speech, it is surprising that DCI public appearances typically went off without a hitch. This was due in no small measure to the hard work and close coordination of the Speeches and Appearances Staff, DCI Security, and the Protocol Office.

Speechwriting differs substantially from any other form of writing. The expository writing style used to create an intelligence report has to be adapted for speechwriting or risks falling flat in front of the DCI and the audience.

Moreover, the time demands associated with drafting intelligence assessments and speeches are different. Writing an assessment is like running a marathon; supervisors have a general idea when they want the paper released, and, in the meantime, the report goes through a near continuous draft-edit-draft cycle. Writing a speech, however, is like running a 50-yard dash. You know that the DCI will be appearing before the World Affairs Council of Boston this Friday and that he will want a good speech by Wednesday. Heaven help you if you have not delivered the speech on time, because Wednesday morning you can expect to receive a call from the DCI's Executive Assistant telling you the Director is looking for his speech. It seems as if everyone in your chain of command drops by your office to ask, "Where is the speech?"

The feedback on a speech is immediate, and it can be brutal. Deputy Directors and Office chiefs are frank in their appraisal of a DCI's performance. If the performance does not meet their expectations, the principal speechwriter quickly becomes the most exposed target. I am glad to say those times were few, and I was fortunate that management deflected most of the spears.

A Memorable Occasion

There are few experiences that surpass writing a speech that fits the mood of the occasion and hits the DCI and the audience just right. Of all the speeches that I wrote, the most effective was the one used to mark the dedication of the Berlin Wall Monument, which took place outside the Southwest entrance of CIA Headquarters on a crisp December afternoon in 1992.

I have always believed that the speeches about people and their quiet, heroic actions call for a special effort from speechwriters. The annual Memorial Day ceremony held in the lobby of the Original Headquarters Building, medals presented posthumously in the DCI suite, and other similar occasions demand the best that a speechwriter can provide. These ceremonies are important, not only for family members in the audience, but also for the Agency because they say much about how we recognize achievement and pay tribute to individual sacrifice.

All these remarks are difficult to draft because they require a personal commitment on the part of the speechwriter. The Berlin Wall Monument dedication ceremony was no exception. In researching the speech, I was continually reminded of our Agency's contribution—a contribution that fell heaviest on earlier generations who worked behind the lines and willingly assumed great personal risk and even death.

I knew it would be a ceremony rich with symbolism. During the course of my research, I also learned that the Original Headquarters Building and the Berlin Wall were being built at the same time, strengthening the link between CIA and the Cold War. But the speech could not stop there; while our new monument served as a reminder, it also offered a fresh challenge:

Our work is not over. There are other walls to tear down—the wall built by tyrants who would deny others their freedom; the wall that imprisons those addicted to illegal drugs; the wall of fear created by the terrorist; and the wall of defiance, built by those who seek weapons of mass destruction.

It was gratifying to be in the audience that bright December afternoon to watch the crowd's response to the remarks by DCI Gates. The speech seemed to strike a resonant chord, and the DCI seemed energized by the ceremony. Now, when I walk by the monument, I feel a special pride in having played a role in its dedication.

Rich Rewards

During my nearly three years as chief speechwriter, I experienced a roller coaster of emotions. It was frustrating, and, at times, unbelievably pressure-filled. I remember being called into work at 2:00 a.m. to find the author of an obscure quote for DCI Webster, who was giving a speech halfway around the world. Dick Kerr asked us for the name of a little-known boxer who went a few rounds with Norman Mailer, just moments before Kerr was to introduce the author. My staff received a call from one DCI on the way to the airport requesting a funny sports story—within the next five minutes—to open a commencement speech at Notre Dame.

You learn a lot about yourself when you have to be creative, facing a blank sheet of paper while the clock counts down. The rewards, however, were incomparable. There were opportunities to travel with the DCI and DDCI and to participate in functions usually reserved for senior Agency officials.

But those are not the memories I will cherish the most. I had the opportunity to produce a quality product that, with little tinkering, went straight to the DCI. I also had an opportunity to interact with senior Agency officers and to be privy to their hopes for the future. Most of all, I had an opportunity to work with a tremendous staff and a highly dedicated group of people in the former Office of Public Affairs.